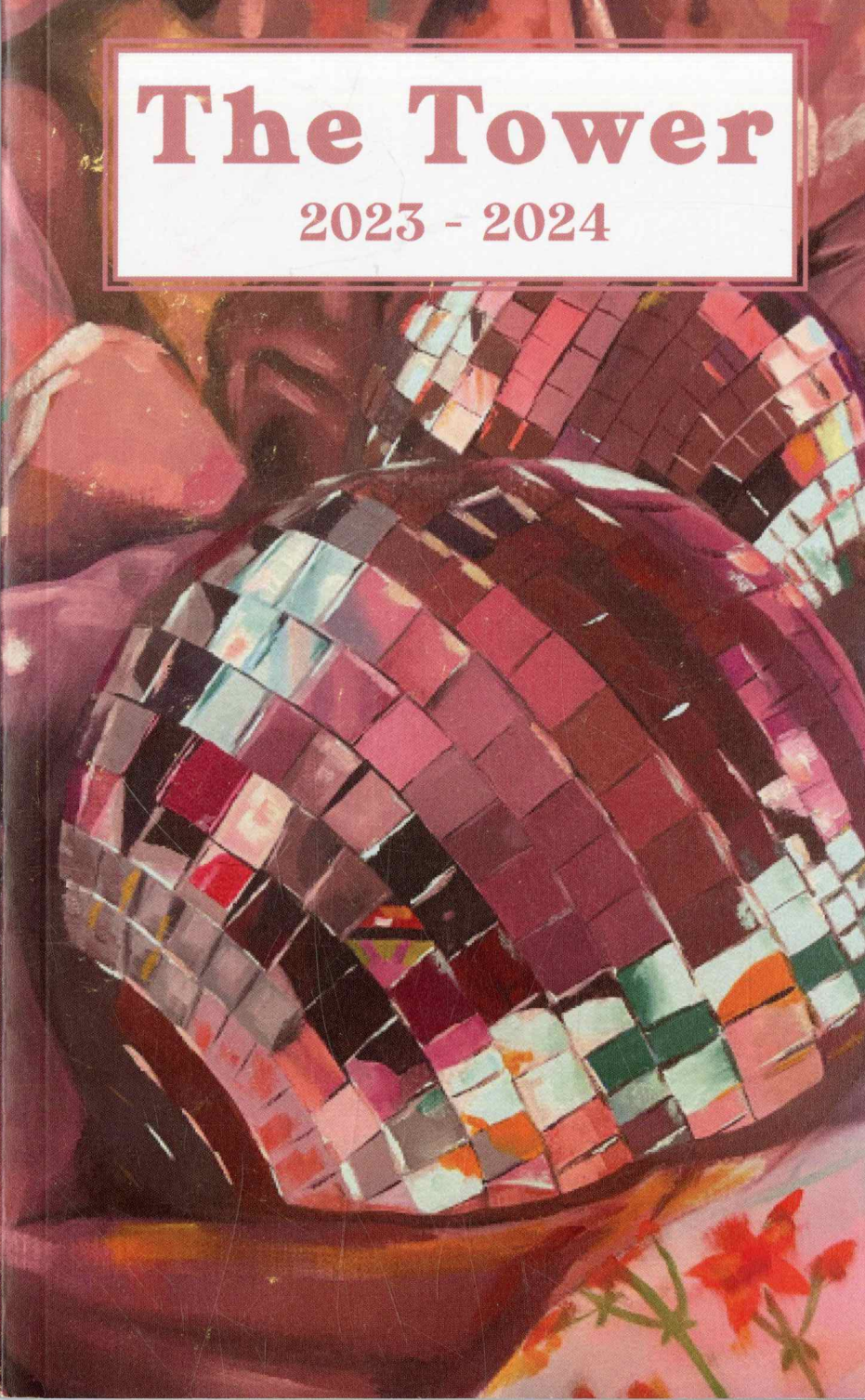
The Tower

2023 - 2024



The Tower

University of Montevallo

2023 - 2024

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Letter from the Editor

We can all be honest here, I know you didn't come here to read what the editor has to say about the works in this book, you came to read them yourselves. But while I have you, I would like to thank the team that worked with me to make this book a reality; I couldn't have asked for a better support system to finish this out strong. Montevallo has a campus full of brilliant students that pour their hearts into their work, and I would like to thank every writer who submitted and gave a part of themselves to this publication.

Now, get a move on! There's so much to see.

Near Hollingsworth
2023-2024 Editor-in-Chief

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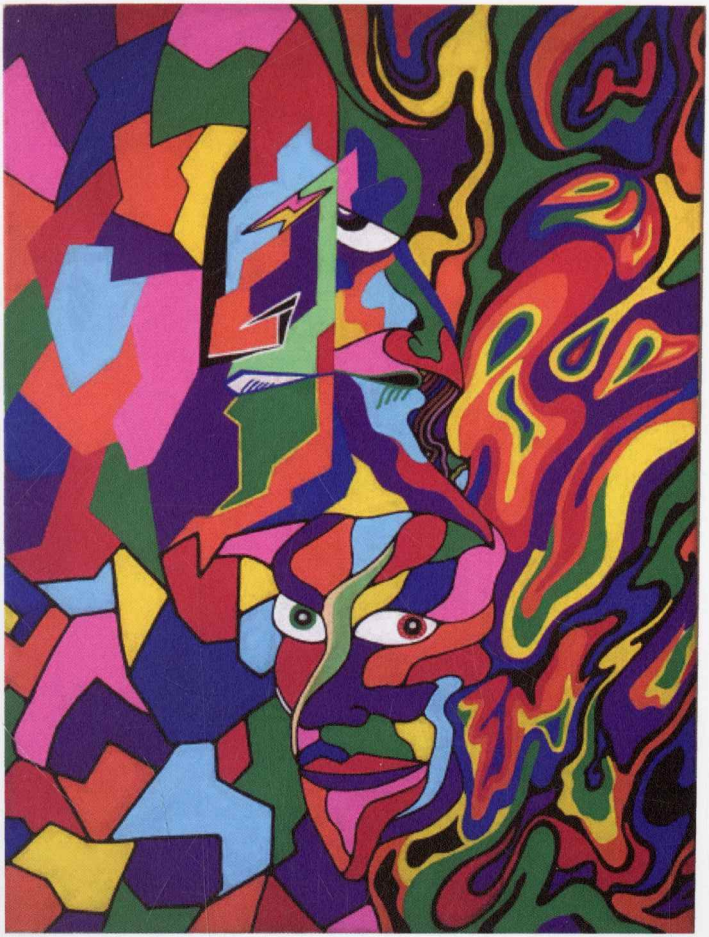


Identical Instabilities

Nate

Eye 2 Eye
Astyr Saylors

Proud Cat's Hunt

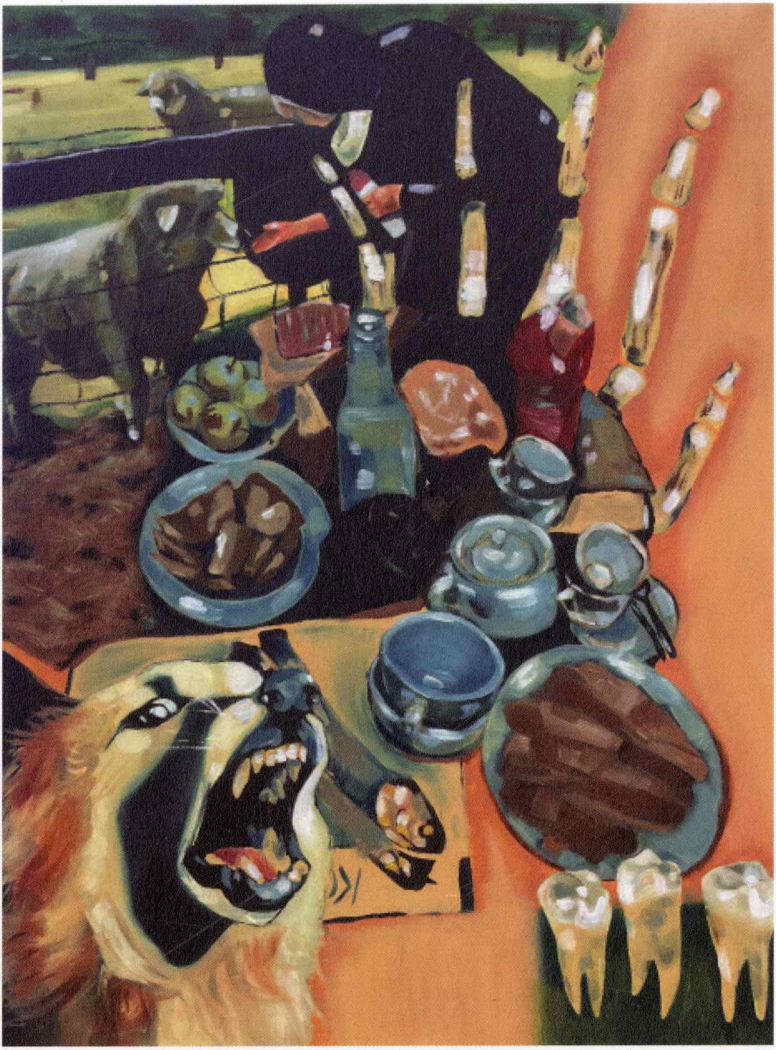
Anabelle Kunz

The feline stood still, claws firm in the ground
His fur shining white and brown and some grey
His emerald eyes sparkled, for he had found
A small, white, lonesome mouse to call his prey

He crouched down low, determined and steady
His tail still, steering clear of a red leaf
If tail and leaf met, the mouse was ready
To run and become a poor home's food thief

If a man were to notice this strange cat
He'd recall how he looked on the outside
His stance and focus would resemble that
Of a lion hunting for his loved pride

The feline leaped, experienced and skilled
Captured his small prey and went for the kill



Bite The Hand
Bella Glattli

Stolen Innocence

Bo Ferguson

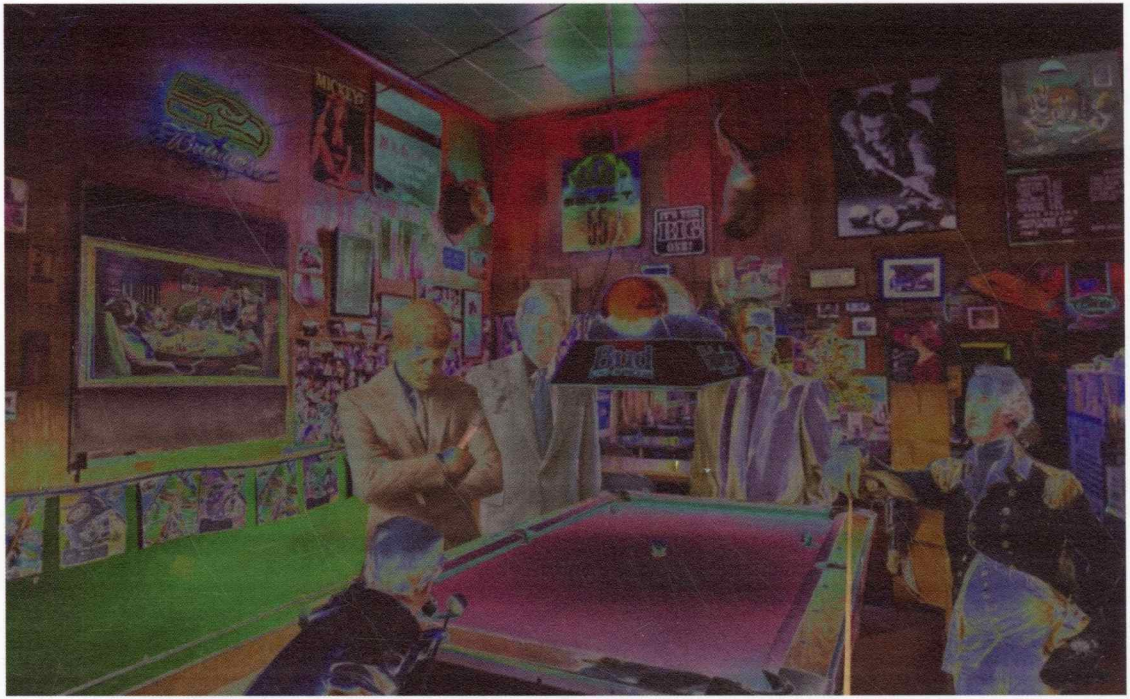
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"
He said as he hoisted my head up to look at him,
eyes aflicker with holy blaze.

On my knees, I prayed for a sanctuary, for love, for you. We drank together, breaking body and blood. That sweet liquid dripped down my chin.

You turned me around and kissed me, slow and deep, tasting like bitter oranges and cigarettes. Tastes that still reminiess for me.

Christ... the man that stole from me. With my lost saints I look for him utterly and entirely searching. A lost kid in a sea of thousands.

Give it back, my childhood, that sense of freedom. Carnal Urges fought back with unholy matrimony.



Presidents Playing Pool

Ryan Spanier

Water Under the Bridge

Ryan Spanier

Red Light

M.K.B.

I slow down to a stop right as the light turns red.

Amy's in the passenger seat, queuing up music on my phone. I'm certain it's mostly stuff that she knows I'll hate.

"You'll really like this band," she says before each song that plays.

I don't. I never do. But I smile and nod anyways as she sings along to the music. We're hours away from home, driving for the mere sake of distracting her from her own feelings.

Most of her problems are her own fault—but I can never say that out loud. She always says that we're best friends. That we're connected in some way that's bigger than ourselves. I think she's full of shit. But I can never say that out loud. We have a lot of the same memories—side effects of knowing each other since middle school, I guess.

I think I'm starting to hate her. But I can never say that out loud.

The light is still red, and I'm tempted to throw myself out of the car and run as far away as I can.

The car next to mine is shaking back and forth. Loud metal music emits from it, and a father

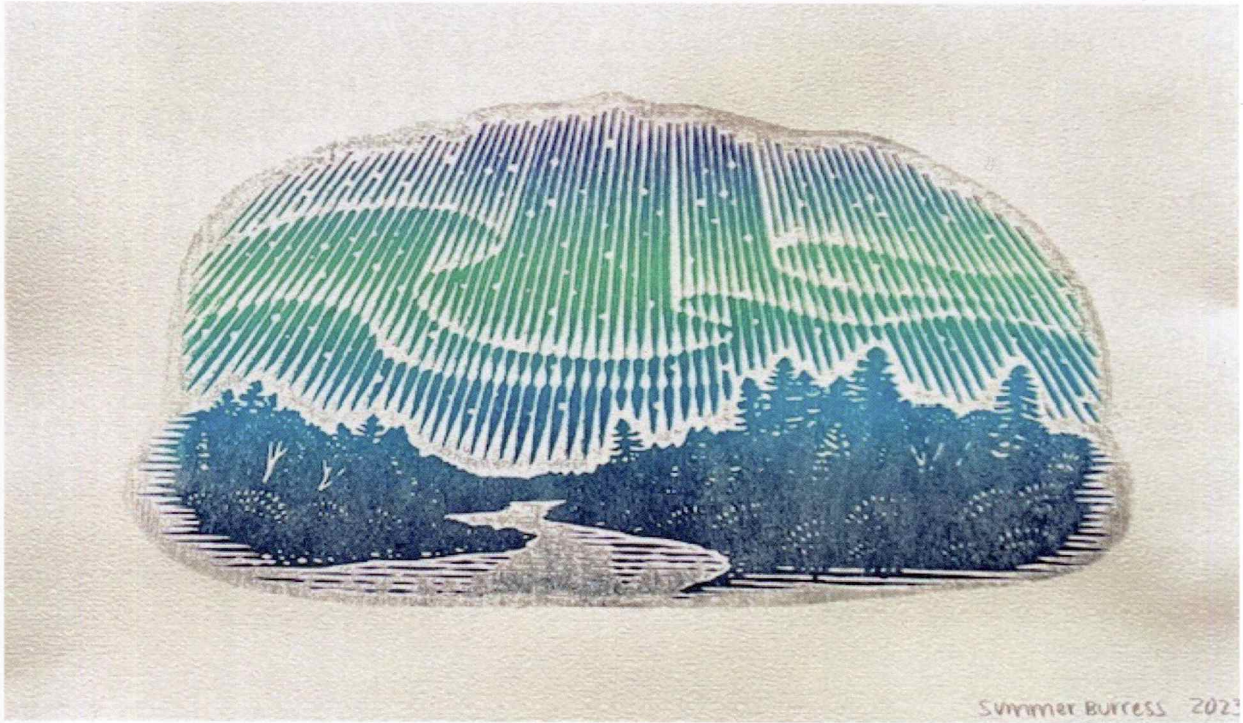
headbangs with his son. A woman walks by with a leashed dog and a baby stroller. She seems like she's got her life together. I wish I could be her. We could swap lives, right here and now. I would walk off, dog and baby in hand, and she would be left here to deal with Amy.

I wonder if she would hate Amy as much as I do, or if my hatred stems from something deeper. Maybe I hate her because of how long I've known her. Maybe she reminds me of a time that I would rather forget. Maybe I hate her because I'm a bad person.

I hope I'm not a bad person.

The light is still red. It's starting to feel like it will never turn green again.

We'll be stuck at this intersection for the rest of our lives.

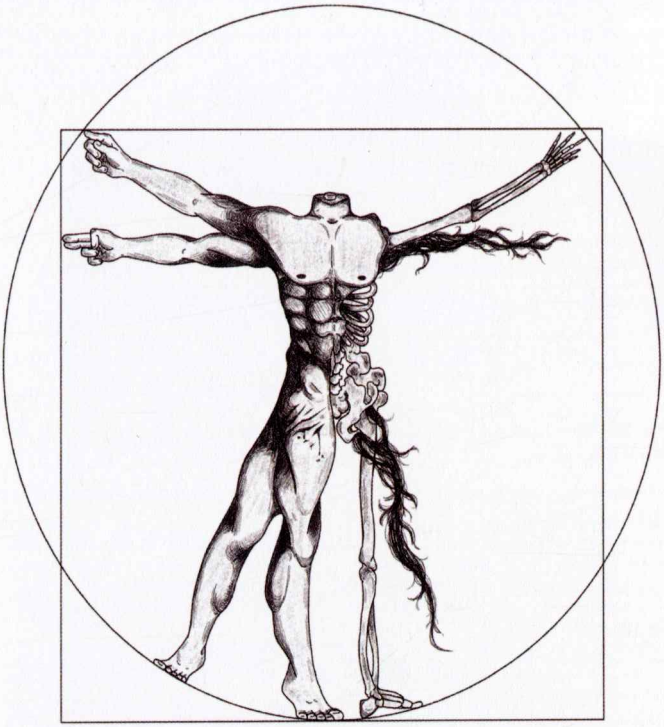


Aurora Borealis

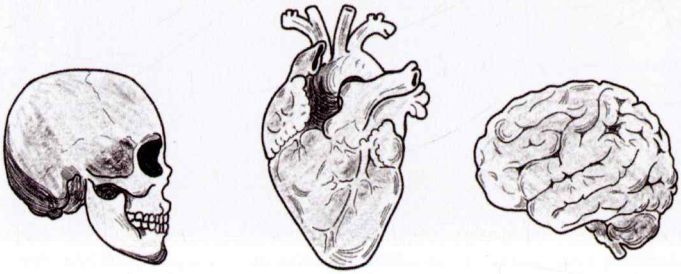
Summer Burress

The Carnivore Den

Ash



We are fashioned creatures, but half made up.



Chemical Wedding

Arabella Cortes

Who's There in the Crossroad State?

Joli Dolus

the fields lack imagination,
and the clouds lack empathy.
my logic fades in the miles of road,
as green signs lack recollections.
i've become lost in a sea of windmills directing the way
as the blades melt in the breezy haze.
up ahead, there's a junction
diverging in many directions
and destinations are uncertain.
the old folks knew
where to merge
and where to exit—or so they say.
but here i wander into the crossroads
with broken headlights and a fog-ridden soul.
the Corn stands with anticipation.
it says hoosierly,

You'll be aimlessly
reaching for the clouds in the
hazes after the turns.

Childhood Fantasy

Bo Ferguson

We were young back then, both flourishing into the people we were to become. Blissfully unaware of the events that would define who we are, what was yet to come.

I remember being scared of that house: of its old rickety floors, its drafty windows, the sprawling landscape of woods surrounding. Those were the years father and mother left us, sending us postcards with fabulous destinations denoting their love—never in person, only through writing.

We were alone, but never lonely. We had a fantasy world. I remember most fondly the rose garden: running, skipping, jumping barefoot, grass between our feet, pretending we were wild knights and fair princesses. Our childhood was strange and unhappy to some, but we were content.

It was a cold night when the fire started. We were away at a Christmas party, reveling in the festivities of merriment, the warmth of the party poetically overtaken by the blaze of the fire.

We came home hours later to no more rickety stairs, no drafty windows, just a remnant of a grand house surrounded by snowy trees. Gone was the

home where I spent the early years of adolescence. In what seemed like an instant I was severed from that little boy running in the gardens.

My sister and I always dreamt of getting away, harboring at some quaint little cottage together at the edge of the world. No one but each other: we had been so used to no one but each other. I wish nothing more now than to go back to that house, seeing it in its destroyed glory, seeing the wreckage of my childhood and reflecting on the wreck that I have become.

I see myself in that house now, just a shell of what once was. A facade of a home. No warmth, no life. Just a disheveled house in the heart of the woods, with sprawling gardens of roses.

Brain Fog
Alex Armer

My Future

Chrisean Anderson

Dark Chocolate, Peanut Butter, Almond, and Vanilla

Eboni McCoy

Dark Chocolate, Peanut Butter, Almond, and Vanilla.
Which flavor taste better?
Dark Chocolate cooks, cleans, and does everything a man wants her to do.
But she still isn't good enough.
Peanut Butter overlooks all the times you've cheated on her.
But she is the one people call a whore.
Almond gets slapped, yelled at, and bruised by your hand.
But strangely she still loves you.
Vanilla spends all your money and runs up your bills.
But her body is treated as the most beautiful thing in the world.

Dark Chocolate, Peanut Butter, Almond, and Vanilla.
Dark Chocolate cries while looking in the mirror.
Her love for you outweighs the love she has for herself.

Peanut Butter knows you don't mind lying to her face.
A strong, unknown force pulls her hand away from the door handle every time.
Almond covers her scars and bruises with makeup.
Each blow to her face shows the number of kisses she's given you.
Vanilla's words persuade you to buy her fancy gifts and cars.
But your love for her is different from the others.

Dark Chocolate, Peanut Butter, Almond, and Vanilla.
What makes Vanilla better than Dark Chocolate?
What makes Peanut Butter better than Almond?
Decide carefully.
Present boundaries.
Act.
Value yourself.
Dark Chocolate, Peanut Butter, Almond, and Vanilla.

Ointment Painting

Isabelle Garrett

My Life

Jada Bryant

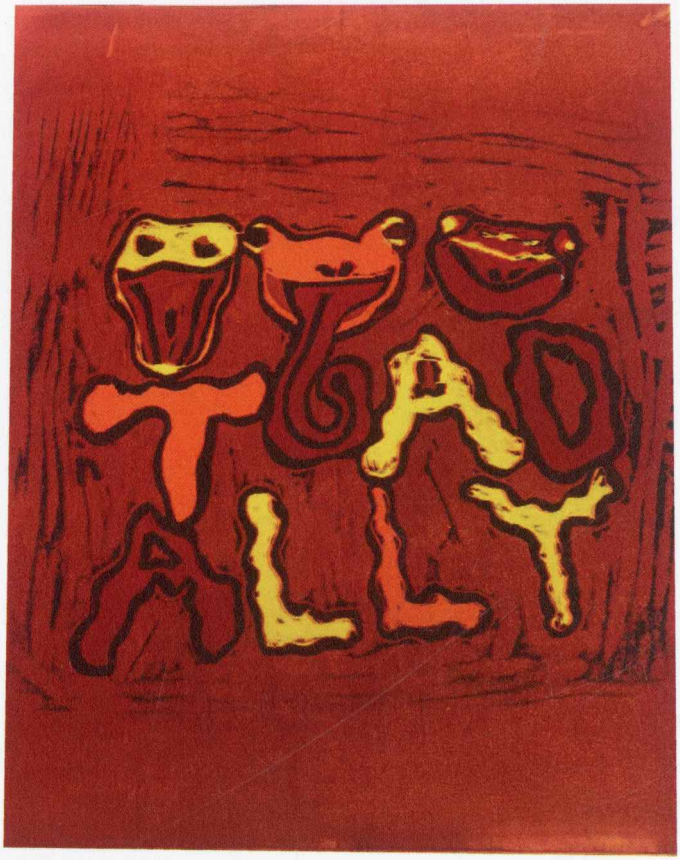
Flowers
Staci Moore

Aim

Jordan Rape

There are lines in the grass in every yard on the block and the symphony of mechanical growls invades the air every evening when the sun decides to take rest from its plot to destroy us. This is when I take my spirits high and walk. Nothing to see but neat houses with the same format and different fonts, and neat little lawns with bricks around the flower beds, and the occasional prisoner of war: the family dog. Every night when I turn the bend around the block, I get to see one rebellious neighbor that refuses these unspoken picket fence laws. He uses chain link instead. The yard has burst open at its seams with dandelions and clover and little violet flowers that I can never identify. He has two trucks on jacks with no tires and no engines, and every night the gates are open and cars flood into the streets with obnoxious laughter and the smell of cheap beer and grilled conecuh. No one on the block ever gets invited to his parties.

When all is silent and I can't sleep, I go on the same route, turning the same corners, observing the same lawns until I am forced to pause at the yard of that old man. On the odd occasions of full moons, he sits upon his roof and, with a will that I have never felt, he shoots arrows up into the sky. His aim is a mystery to me, but the kinship I find in that figure is a comfort. When the trucks are towed away, and the chain link fence is replaced with a shield of fresh-sanded wood, and the ecosystem outside the front porch is hacked down to neat little lines of grass, I will wonder what he was aiming for. But I will know that this isn't it.



Toadally
Ryan Spanier

Why a Banana?

Skye Anderson

When we were in the store that day, it was warm and I glowed and I didn't care. The sun did not burn me like it had the other times. You were explaining the meaning of that album cover to me—you and the man at the counter—and I felt a strange awareness. I've known what it is like to be explained to; I know the strange radio waves of power there And though I perhaps should've been abashed, I felt content in my role, that I did not mind it from you. That from vignettes of my ineffaceable womanhood pour strength, not frailty. Pour love, too. Because I do. Even as you hold your magnifying glass too close to see, I see you; and I hold your preconceptions like a flipbook that I slam shut in resolute love. I hear you speak and each fallacy grazes one nerve for every hundred fondled by wonder. Recite every verity I know and in your voice it will feel new.

Embers

Alex Williams

Those last few embers fade away
as the wind carries their ashes to only God knows where.
And the little orange specks are so beautiful
as they ascend against the backdrop of a starry sky
painted with little splotches of white
and other, more subtle colors.

Where do they really go?
Maybe they go looking for other fires to fuel.
Little infantile flickers and emitters of heat
just waiting for the right heart, the right core for their argument
that says "I am alive! Here I am!"
Maybe there they find new life.

Or maybe God scoops them up
as the last bits of warmth vanish from their likenesses.
Maybe he takes them and paints in the dark parts of the night sky
with a prodigious brush, filling in the gaps.
They become the paint, and the cosmos is their canvas.
Maybe there they find a purpose.

Perhaps they simply sink back down to Earth.
Gracefully they glide, taking in the vastness around
until they land in a stream or a field somewhere.
Maybe they burrow down into the dirt to hide themselves,
ashamed that they fell from such great heights.
Maybe there they find nothing.

What if they find their way into the underbrush?
Still surviving off of the residual heat left from their departure,
maybe they float down to a drought-stricken spot
where their heat catches on.
Soon, everything shares that passion.
Maybe there they find their place.

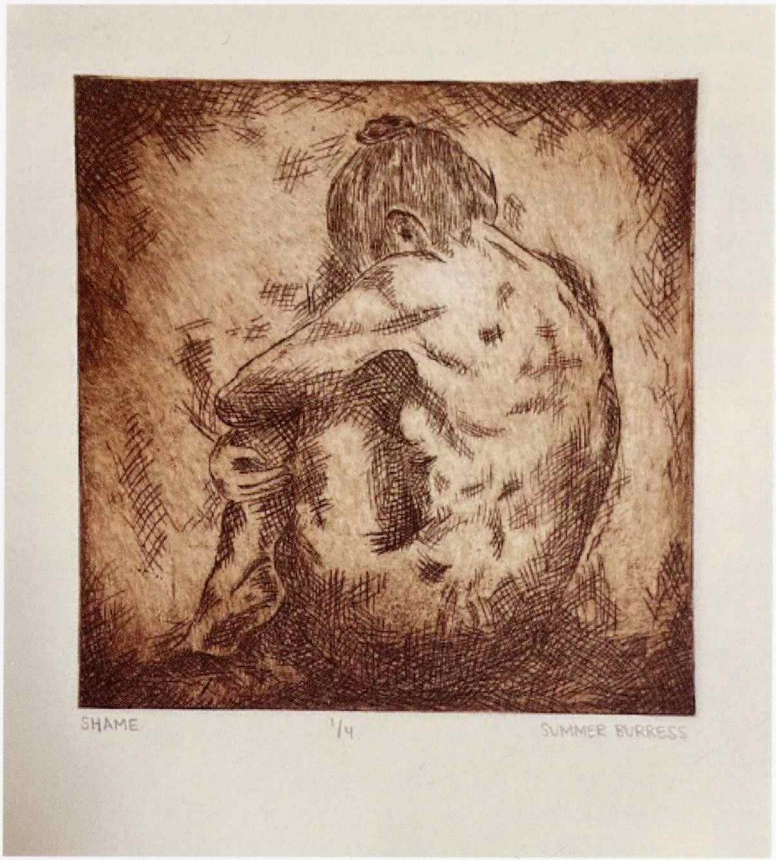
But what if they just disappear?
The wind is strong and cruel sometimes.
Maybe their light is stolen
and they are left as nothing but dust
to be scattered along the breeze.
Maybe they just cease.

The Country
Jada Bryant

The Country

Jada Bryant

A place with unclaimed space.
A place where the sun hugs your face.
A place with untouched land.
A place with all the love at hand.
A place where you can count on a home-cooked meal.
A place where the love from the food makes you feel.
A place where you feel safe.
A place where my roots lay and where I first learned to pray.
A place I pray to God I can call my home one day.
This is what I mean when I say the country.



Shame
Summer Burress

She Taught Me How To Look At Myself

Maeghan Jeremiah

I looked at her, how her hair fell swiftly in front of her eyes and how she brushed it away with her soft hands. I looked at her, how her eyes lit up when she spoke about her favorite book. I looked at her and how her eyebrows creased together in bewilderment when she didn't understand. I looked at her and I realized how much I loved her. The only problem was I couldn't look at myself. I dodged every mirror I came across. I clothed myself with my eyes shut tight, in hopes that if I didn't see myself I couldn't acknowledge the fact that I fell in love with a girl. I couldn't even look at myself.

I was taught my entire life that loving someone of the same gender was wrong. My parents, pastors, and grandparents repeatedly taught me that homosexuality is a sin. I believed this until I met this one girl in sixth grade. She sat in the row next to mine in biology, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Her backpack was blue, and she smelled like vanilla. Her long black hair always fell perfectly around her face, and when she smiled, her eyes melted into crescent moons. We quickly became close friends, and we FaceTimed several times a week. I'd say I needed help with my homework or that I was bored and wanted to talk. She was stunning, and I adored her. But I still couldn't look at myself.

I was a devout Christian at the time: I went to church every Sunday morning, night, and Wednesday.

But I didn't have much of a choice; my parents forced me to go, but the thing was, I wanted to go. I didn't know anything about myself if I wasn't a Christian, which I always had been. On a Wednesday night, the pastor decided to speak about homosexuality, citing numerous biblical passages that clearly stated it was a sin. I trusted him. My phone dinged, indicating that I had received a message; looking down, I see the ID as her, the girl who had consumed my thoughts. I thought it was hilarious that she texted me during church; the irony made me laugh. My attention was drawn away from my phone by the pastor's words, "Those who love another of the same gender will have to face their wrongdoings." I knew then that I had to look into this Christian logic on homosexuality. I felt guilty for questioning what I had been taught, but were my feelings so wrong? I showered when I got home, but I couldn't bear to look at myself.

I lay on my bed with my eyes wide open, waiting for the house to quiet down, indicating that everyone had gone to bed. I took out my phone and launched a private search in Safari. "What does the Bible say about homosexuals?" I bit my nails as it loaded, waiting to see what it would show me. I went from site to site all night, reading until my eyes hurt and getting a headache from the bright light contrasting against the dark room. My mind was rushing with so much contradictory information that I couldn't breathe. I turned off my phone and laid down for a few moments before reaching for it again. I opened a new tab in the private search bar and entered "Am I gay?" I received the result of pansexual after taking a test I found. I had no idea what that

meant, but after googling it, I realized that little test was right. When I woke up the next morning, I looked in the mirror and sobbed. This couldn't be who I was; I was a sinner for just thinking these things. For the rest of the day I couldn't even look at myself.

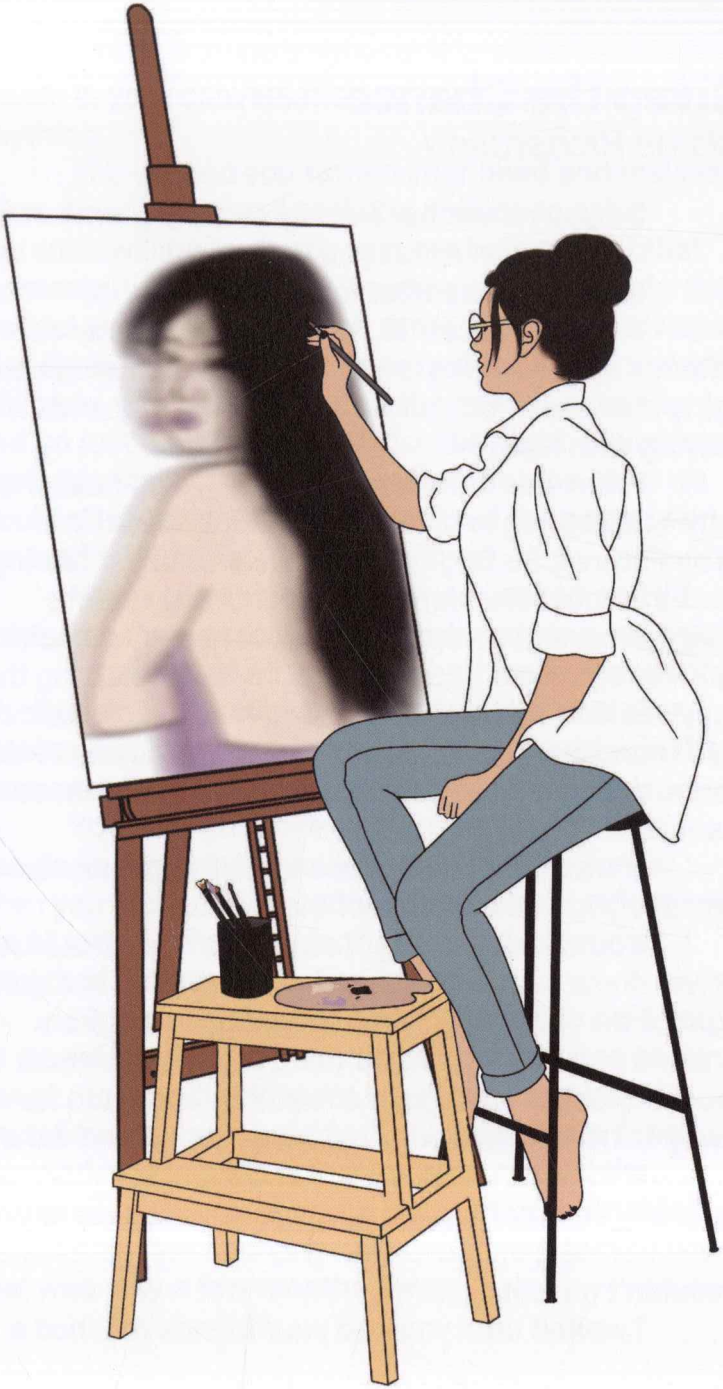
I started to feel like I shouldn't even be friends with this girl, so I started to distance myself from her. I felt terrible for doing it, but I knew I had no choice. I'd see her from across the room: her eyes would sparkle, her hair would shine, and her face would glow. I wanted to hold her hand, but I couldn't, because liking her was wrong. Every day, I would not just look at her, I would gaze. She was lovely, charming, studious, passionate, and beautiful. Distancing myself didn't last, and I still couldn't look at myself.

A few years passed. I was a sophomore now, and I realized Christianity just wasn't for me. Not because I liked women—I knew there were plenty of LG BTQ+people who were also Christians—but because it just wasn't for me. I spent many nights watching videos and reading on Christianity and atheism and agnosticism. I realized I am agnostic: I don't know if there is anything beyond this life. I began to feel okay with this, until I wasn't. I envied the faithful because I used to have that blind faith and it was stripped from me. But I couldn't be mad at anyone but myself. I had taken that away from myself at my own hands; I had chosen not to believe anymore. It was disorienting to discover who I was without that. I was angry with myself, with my parents, with Christians, and with her. I was feeling isolated and alone. Nobody else I knew felt the same way; I grew up in a small town where everyone went to

church and was Republican. The fact that within a few years I had completely swung to the left side of the issue and had such a hard stance on it was isolating. I couldn't tell my family I was pansexual, I couldn't tell them I no longer believed in God, and I still couldn't look in the goddamn mirror.

High school came and went, as did my lovely girl. I never told her how I felt or how she had helped me discover myself. I still talk to her on occasion, and perhaps one day I will have the courage to tell her. I will tell her how she took my breath away but returned it to me all at once. I will tell her how her smile made my heart race and my mind relax. I will tell her about how I can now stand in front of the mirror and look at myself.

But for now I trace along the edges of her face with my paintbrushes. Remembering the way she looked, how she made me feel. I draw her with the delicacy I would use if I ever get to touch her again. I am so grateful I met this beautiful girl, the one who taught me to look at myself.



Given the Chance

Blaine Richardson

Do you remember our high school prom?

I don't believe that you do.

Luckily, I remember for both of us.

I was in the corner, my nose down in my cup with my eyes hanging lower. I had gotten there about thirty minutes prior. I had come with nobody and I was leaving with nobody.

Prom was sunglasses-themed. Don't ask me why—something to do with the year. I walked into "The Future's So Bright I Gotta Wear Shades" blaring over the speakers. Half the people there wearing sunglasses and complaining about how they couldn't see through them, with the other half complaining that they couldn't see anything due to how dark it was. I had found and reclaimed my spot in the corner of the room, the spot I'd had for every single one of these dances.

It was the perfect place for me to glance up and see you in the middle of the room.

You were stunning. You wore a beautiful blue velvet dress with high heels that sparkled in the soft light of the room every time they slipped out from under the dress. You stood there with your friends, laughing about some joke or another. I was too far away to hear what it was, but I was sure it was funny.

It took an unbelievable amount of time for me to finally summon up the courage to walk over to you. I was nervous, of course, but this was my last chance. I couldn't miss it.

I waited until you and your friends reached a

breath in your conversation so I wouldn't interrupt anything.

The second you turned your head and realized I was standing there, I took the chance to ask if you were willing to dance with me before I lost that momentary bit of nervous confidence. I was lucky that we had already known each other for a while, always friendly but never friends. I wanted to see if you were willing to skip that step, pass the exit for a friend and go just a bit further, only for the night. It was our senior dance: school ended in two months, then we would all head to different corners of the country or the world. What did we have to lose?

You smiled so brightly when I asked and I'll never forget your response: "Took you long enough."

You giggled and I gave a half smile, wondering whether to say a stupid, cheesy line like "sorry for stealing her" to your friends, or if that would ruin the moment.

You said goodbye to them before I could decide and told them you'd meet after the dance. Then you looked at me, your emerald eyes reflecting the blue and yellow lights that swirled around us. I stretched out my hand. You took it.

I will always remember how it felt to hold you as we swayed to the music. How you laughed at my dance moves when a more energetic song came on, but how I was so giddy that I found them funny too. And how, when we took a break, we left the gymnasium floor and sat on those uncomfortable plastic bleachers, talking about the uncertain future that was only a few months away.

You wanted to go to Arizona State, ASU, for a degree in microbiology. "You're getting the hell out of this state, huh?" I half-joked.

You just smiled and nodded, then opened your mouth to say something, just to close it and nod again. I wondered if we had spent some more time together before that moment if you would've revealed what was hidden behind that smile, if the words trapped behind your teeth would've spilled to spell out the reason you were leaving. But too little, too late.

You just looked over and said "yeah, you can say that. What about you?"

"In-state." I said. "Montevallo. Probably psychology, and looking into minoring in writing."

"That's cool," you responded before looking back over at the crowd of people dancing.

It was my turn to nod. I didn't bother to ask whether you were saying that because it was actually cool or because you just wanted to be nice. I knew the answer, and I didn't care.

You looked around the room and sighed. "What do you say we dance around some more?"

I said I'd be delighted.

The minutes we spent together blended into hours, and soon enough the music started to die down as more and more people slowly started to filter out into the night. We stayed for a while, then eventually followed when you noticed your friends waving to you from the door. We went and stood together outside the gymnasium as you held my hand, fingers interlocked, looking out to where your friends were.

"I shouldn't let you keep your friends waiting." I

said, using my other hand to nervously adjust my tie. I looked at you and gave another half smile. "I really enjoyed tonight. Thank you for it."

You kept looking towards your friends, but the corner of your lip turned up into a smile only I could see. "Do me a favor when you get to Montevallo," you said. "Think of me from time to time."

I grinned. "I will."

We said our goodbyes, unlocked our fingers and pulled our hands apart, though I felt us both linger for a second before we fully disconnected.

I watched as you walked towards your friends, then turned to begin the lonely walk to my car.

I would say that I wish there was more to this story. I would say that I wish you could add onto it. I would say that I wish you even remembered. But I know the reason why you don't.

It never happened.

There's no more to this story because it's just that: a story. I never did get the courage to come up to you that night. That night never even happened—we were locked down in our homes miles apart on the night prom was supposed to take place.

I'm sorry that I made it all up. I wish I didn't have to. But I do. Because I have to know if, given the opportunity, I would have been able to walk up to you that night, and if I would have been able to ask you to dance before losing my momentary confidence. And seeing that now we've put even more miles between us, the only answers I can get are the ones I make up.

It would be easier to try and call all of this a missed opportunity, but in order for me to have missed it there would've had to be an opportunity in

the first place.

I have to run through that night in my head, a night that never happened, over and over to know whether I would've seized the chance if I was given the opportunity. I have to know if it hurts worse to get turned down or to never get the chance to be turned down.

As I drive home from the dance, I watch your headlights dance in my rear view until I finally turn off the road you're on and watch as your car's silhouette passes behind me.

Woodgrain
Laura Griffin

Phantasm

Aubrey O'Bryant

I'm not real until you touch me
I am a low hanging fog
A humid curl of fizzing freckled light
Watercolor plumes suspended in a paint cup,
Slowly dissipating into a murky haze

I am art, acrylic on stretched canvas
I have no purpose without an audience
To interpret and dissect and determine my worth
Eye me, gawk and stare and study and absorb
Just don't look away, please, once you do
Before I become a pile of line and color,
meaningless scribbles
Sitting solitary on a gallery wall

Notice how I come into focus under your
fingertips
Particles neatly falling in line
Touch my face to twist the lens
Blurred features sharpening
Though still soft on you

Please, don't pull away, don't step back
Don't leave me to dissolve into the open air
I have spent so long in that hellish abstraction
Stuck in superposition until viewed
Your eyes squinted into double slits

Please bring your hand to my skin
Whether it be soft or scarring
Give me life, I beg of you
To bleed is to live and I want that
Just don't pull your flesh from mine.

Cross Section

Aubrey O'Bryant

your tongue is shiny slick smooth
impossibly sharp broken glass
you cut without touching skin
soft spoken sin in my ear
saccharine lips spilling blood,
soaking my jeans
without striking me once

when you do, though
when that precious muscle writes
smut on my skin with your spit
it's as good as a scalpel
slide it down my sternum
slice me open, taste my sinew
suck the soft tissue, push past the muscle
split the bone, suck my marrow
swallow the smooth, thick substance
let my body nourish yours

when you pull away
the umbilical strand of saliva
gives you a chance to change your mind
to return your tongue to my flesh

Winter on the Farm
David Martin

Whitestown Crackerbarrel, An Unforgettable Pit Stop in a Road Trip

Joli Dolus

Exit 130 on i65, heading south,
I saw the most beautiful
woman I have ever seen.

The smile she gave
is branded in my brain
and her blue eyes
are eternally embraced.
her soft voice resonates
in my ears as she
asked "How many?"

I sat with my friends at the table she
chose. I couldn't help but watch her work.

Her arms wrapped around
the menus pressed against
her chest. Her head draped to the floor
to watch her own steps.

Some waitress intruded,
my friends ordered and
my menu lay untouched.
I lost my appetite—
I filled with butterflies.

I never thought someone
could look so ethereal
in a blue collar shirt
with a brown apron
that matched her
short brown hair. The apron
tied neatly and tight
around her figure.

Another waitress intruded
with bowls of chicken pot pie,
biscuits, and some other stuff
I don't remember.

She was perched
off her stool leaning
on her podium. Her
left hand slumped
as her fingers tapped
in boredom, her
right hand pressed
on her cheek, her
eyes staring in solitude
as she breathed out.

My friends asked why I'd
been so quiet.
"I just wanna get back on the road."
That was a total lie.

Her hair was adorable.
It fluffed and and curved
halfway to the neck
and jumped, covering
a bit of her forehead.

Another waitress intruded,
handing checks to my friends
and thanking us for dining with them.

My friends and I walked back to the lobby
where she stood with silence and boredom,
doodling on a sticky note.

I couldn't bear to look at her, let alone say anything.
My heart weighed my feet down and locked my neck
to look away.

This was six months ago.
It's often said that a hostess
becomes the first and last impressions
of a restaurant—she became the only
impression I had from this road trip,
forever immortalized in the wrinkled
pages in my journal into something
that'll never be shared with anyone.
I've been thinking about going back,
because even rejection would be better
than having her face in the clouds
Forever. But she'd probably say no.

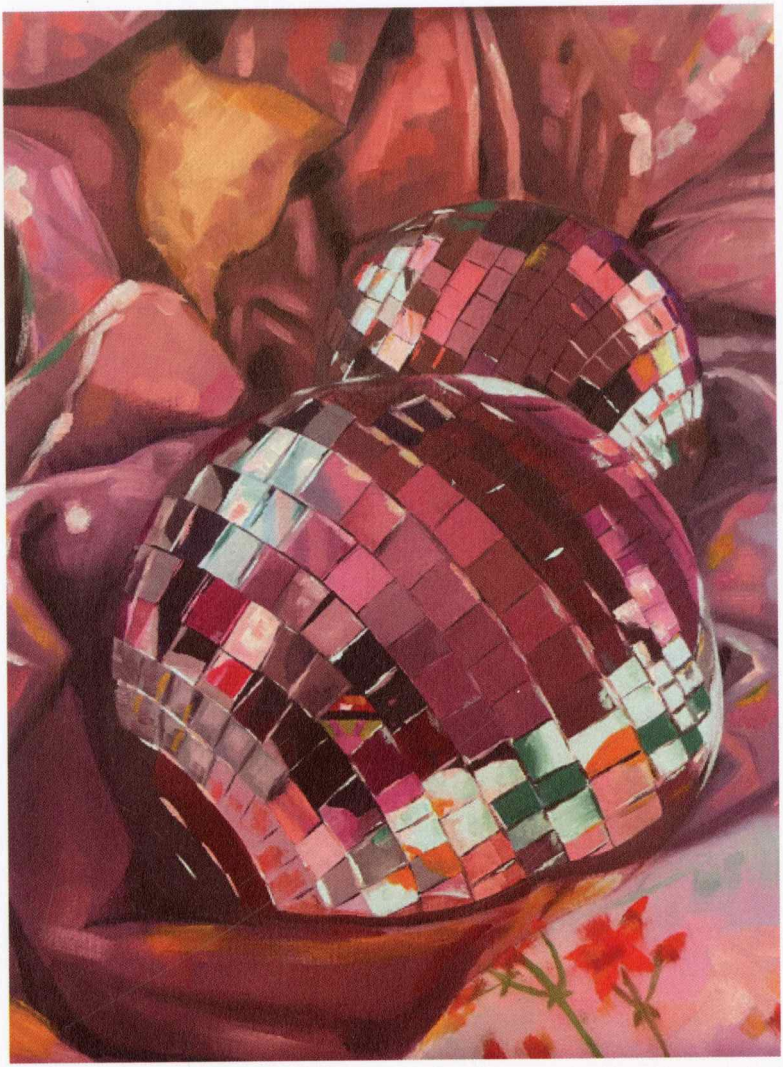
Untitled
Frida González-Ruiz

5 Pounds of Feathers
Ryan Spanier

Double Standard

Bo Ferguson

You once told me we had to stop,
And I listened, retreating back to my side.
How many times did I ask you to stop?
Yet you slithered down, forcing me to open up.
I was your flower, pretty to show off.
But you held me like a little boy,
Crushing me in your fist,
The same fist that hit me when I wilted,
The same hands that caress me now.
Did I deserve this, I asked.
The question echoes even now.
I lay there, moving when needed, pretending.
You finished, you left, I cried.



Mirrorball
Bella Glattli

I tear and pick at my skin until it bleeds then buy oils and balms to gently soothe it back to life

I hurt myself so that I may heal luxuriously

and if healing is a ritual of self care, then hurting must be too.

Rituals of Hurt and Healing - Bo Ferguson

The Rhythm I Dance To

Maeghan Jeremiah

The paramedics strapped my body into the gurney and lifted me up into the ambulance. I watched as the sun began to creep down toward the horizon, the last flickering light of day. I felt my essence flicker out with it. The doors shut and everything fell silent. I could see my mother's face through the back window, distraught. My father, a look of disappointment. Me, lost. This was the second time I had to leave this way. The second time I wasn't trusted to keep myself safe. I kept telling myself as I looked up at the ceiling of the ambulance that I didn't mean to do it, that I didn't want to die. The truth was that I did. I knew exactly what I was doing when I ran as fast as I could moments before a pair of hands ripped my body away from what I wanted more than anything.

I was put in a wheelchair despite the fact that I could walk perfectly fine. They wheeled me into the ER's psychiatric section.

The front desk clerk appeared to be having a bad day. She scoffed at me and asked loudly in the crowded waiting room, "Why did you try to kill yourself?"

I looked at her in shock. I wasn't expecting such a direct question, and to be honest, there's no

simple answer.

"I asked a question," the lady said again.

All I could say was "I don't know" as she rolled her eyes and pointed to a room.

The paramedic then rolled me into the back. After a few moments, a doctor entered and examined me, checking my vitals, heart rate, and weight. I stood backwards on the scale: I couldn't bear to look at the number. He shook his head and scribbled down some numbers. I sat back in the wheelchair the paramedic had provided for me while he wrote.

When he was finished, the doctor walked away, then looked back at me and asked, "you can walk, can't you?"

I just kept my head down and stood to follow him. He gave me a cup to pee in, a plastic bag for my current clothes, a pair of blue socks with grips on the tops and bottoms, and a pair of blue scrubs.

"Take everything off. No jewelry, no wires, no laces, no bra. And if your underwear has elastic, take them off."

I nodded as a female nurse came and watched me change.

In that ER I was stripped of everything—my clothes, my makeup, my jewelry, my dignity. As I wore paper thin scrubs, they could see right through me. "What made you try to do it?" many doctors would ask

me. The only problem was I didn't have an answer. I was failing; I had failed my classes, failed my parents, failed in killing myself, and now failed to have an explanation. An answer—that was all I was looking for in the end, wasn't it? So why did they expect me to know? I wished I could explain why I wanted to die just as much as they wanted me to tell them. I wished I could blame someone for why my next breath would be a challenge; but I couldn't. It was my fault. I felt anger. I was angry at myself, angry with how my life was, angry that nobody noticed. I wanted to rip the skin from my bones and show them that this is all I was, skin and bones.

I was told that I would have to stay the night in the ER because no psychiatric units in the area had any available beds. At this point, it was late in the evening. The light from the hallway flooded the room.

The room I was in had a "bed" dead center of the room, with a three-inch-thick mattress. The "beds" in the unit were plastic rectangles bolted to the floor with a mattress on top. The nurse in the doorway typed away on the computer, occasionally looking up to make sure I was still alive. A small couch sat on the left wall where my mother slept restlessly. She refused to leave me there alone.

My back hurt, but not as much as my heart; guilt set in. The realization that I was the source of

chaos in my family members' lives broke me. A single tear fell from my cheek onto the hard plastic beneath me: the first tear I cried since I tried to die.

I didn't sleep that night, I couldn't. After they brought me breakfast from the hospital cafeteria I was told they'd found a bed for me at Hillcrest Behavioral Health Services. Little did I know what I was walking into.

When the paramedics arrived to take me to the ward, they chuckled, "Nice to see you again." I knew they were just being polite, but I didn't find anything amusing. I get a kick out of it now, how the same paramedics had to get me so many times that they knew who I was.

I arrived at the facility on a stretcher, tied down like a bitch. Was I? Was I some rabid dog that had to be tamed? Still wearing these see-through scrubs with no undergarments, I was let off the stretcher and led into the big steel door that kept the patients locked away. I waved goodbye to my parents and stepped into what would be the worst two weeks of my life.

My parents had brought my books for me as I was still a high school student with work to complete. I had been told I would be able to contact my teachers and receive my coursework; but I never saw a single worksheet, test, or computer my whole stay there.

I rounded the corner and was met with the eyes of other patients standing in their doorways like inmates eyeing fresh meat. I crossed my arms over my chest in an attempt to hide my exposed body.

I was eventually given my regular clothes and was allowed to change. The only clothes I had been permitted to bring were those with no elastic or strings; all of my hoodies' drawstrings had to be removed. My shoes lacked laces, and I lacked honorability.

When I walked out into the hallway, I saw a single girl doubled over, attempting to reach the nurses' station. Blood poured from her mouth and splattered across the corridor. Nurses ran to her and took her away. That was the first of many incidents I would witness.

The rest of the day we went from room to room doing different "fun" activities. I mostly colored—with crayons, of course, because no pointed objects were allowed. I was coloring next to this girl when a swift brush of air flew past my face, ripping some of my hair out. The target was not me, but the girl next to me, who was sprawled out on the floor, blood dripping from her nose. I held my head where the hair was pulled, and I learned not to sit too close to other patients after that.

The next morning I awoke abruptly to screaming. The walls echoed with loud banging, followed by silence. I looked out the open door of my room to see a young girl's limp body being dragged away. A doctor soon arrived to inform everyone that we were on lockdown and that we were to remain in our rooms until further notice.

My roommate looked at me and explained that this happened frequently when the other patients are violent that day.

I was there for more than a week and only saw a doctor once during my entire stay. I saw more blood and violence than I did a white coat. Doctors claim that these facilities are "here to help you," but I left with more trauma than I had when I arrived.

Although there was one other person there who was actually nice, she was the only one. I remember how much I knew I would miss her when I left early on a Tuesday morning. I had no idea we'd end up at the same college and become best friends. She's now my rock; I know I can call her whenever I need to talk or simply need a bed to sleep in. She is the only good thing to come out of that place.

My life has not been an easy one. I would love to end this essay saying that this is in the past, that I am better now. Give inspirational quotes and words of hope for others going through the same thing, but

I can't. This is my life, my reality. Every day I open my eyes and it is hard not to shut them again. The medications help; they sometimes make me numb, but how can I complain? The story I told happened almost five years ago, but it feels like it happened last month to me. My therapist told me a few weeks ago that either my emergency contact had to come get me or I had to go to the hospital—my choice, though it didn't seem that I had one.

I know I will spend my life going through this cycle of pain. But I have accepted it. This is the rhythm that is my life. I hear the beat of my heart pound in my ears, the click of my medication bottles opening and closing, the hum of distant memories. And I dance, despite the pain, despite the loud thoughts circling my mind. This rhythm is something I have learned to live with. And besides, the beat isn't too bad.

The Smell of His Cigarettes

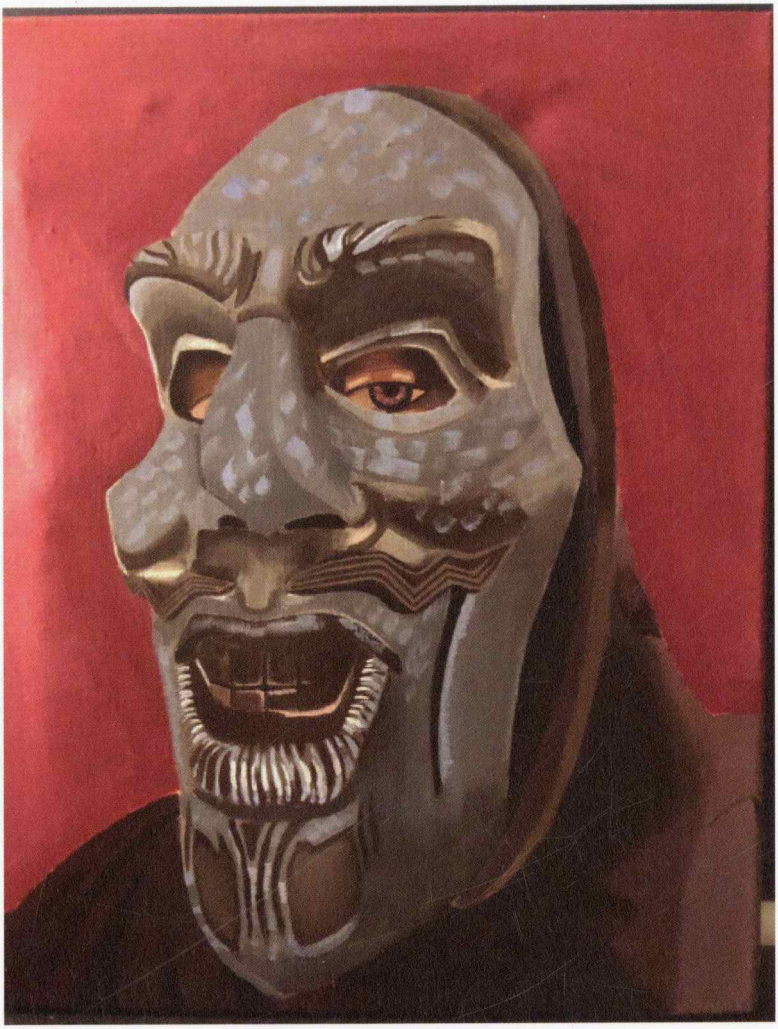
Maeghan Jeremiah

The smell of his cigarettes
Almost sweet
Fading my judgment
In a beaten-up white SUV
Riding down potholed streets
Making memories we will never forget
Or maybe just me
My heart was under the wheels
And still, I let him push the pedal
Kissing him tasted like mint and smoke
I inhaled memories
Years of mistakes
Regrets
And this was mine

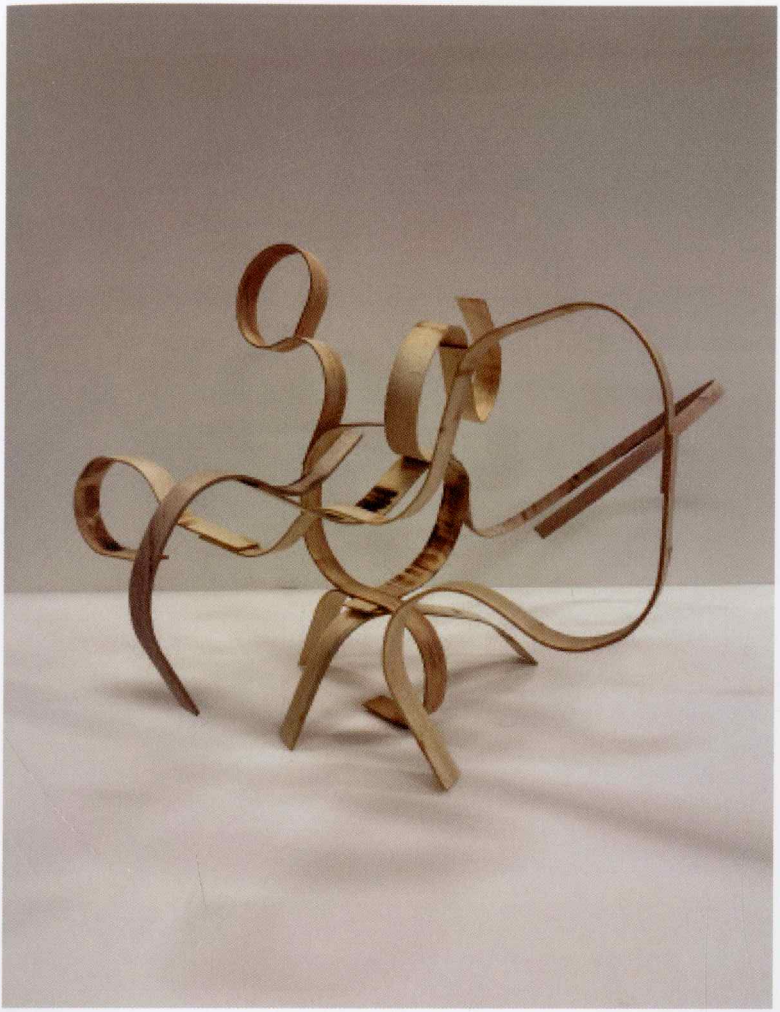
He sprinkled his ash on me like fairy dust
I thought I could fly
I rubbed the ash on my bare skin to make the smell last

I bathed in the memory of him
The ashtray becoming my new bathtub
The water, embers
His cologne stuck to me for weeks despite the smoke

The smell of weed in his backseats
Why do I miss the way he spoke
The way he held me
This one story of him and I
I will never understand
I cured my wounds and tried to forget
Oh, it was good while it lasted
Left with the smell of his cigarettes.

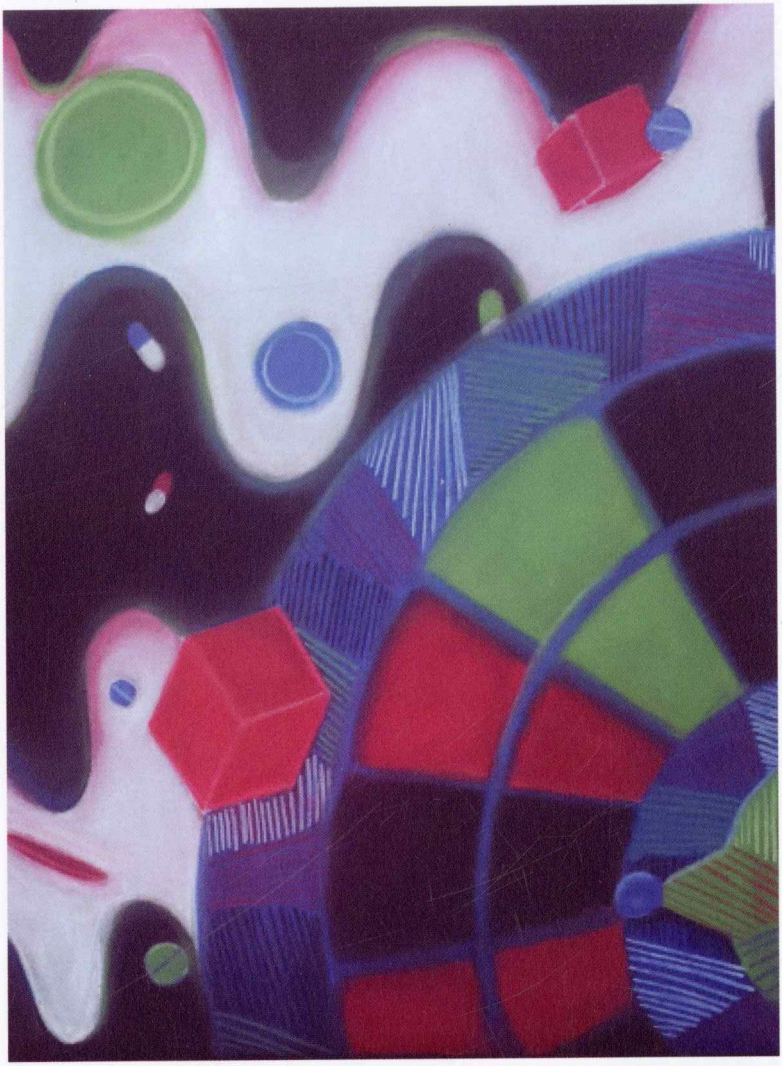


Demise Within Revelry
Nate



Untitled

Ryan Spanier



Wheel of Fortune #1
Astyr Saylors

Collage
Laura Griffin

Spectacle or Spectral?

Olive Reifers

Here follows my
Will and Testament:
Should I die
At the hands of State,
Or the hands of those
With the roots of hate
Burrowed into their minds?
Do not flaunt my corpse
Through your town squares
And your courts.
My putrefying flesh cares little
For your thoughts
And your prayers.
A poor use of a cadaver
If there ever was one.
So cremate me with prejudice
If such is necessary to avoid
Making a mechanical idol
Out of a superficial image.

My Will to Power
Should not go quietly.
It should not rest.
Not in Peace,
Nor in Power.
Raise my ghost with fury.
And with the fire I knew in life,
My specter will rage.
Make me fuel for your fires,
Your great immolations
And glorious arsons.
Those cold temple bureaucrats
Of violence and law
Will know my unhomely presence
As they hear my screams,
As their walls crumble,
And the rioters will feel
As My cries join their own.
Let my ghost bask in revolution.
That is not dead
Which can eternally haunt.